

Managing Leadership Stress

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Tight budgets, results accountability, corporate politics and employee retention concerns – if the mention of those stress factors accelerates your heart rate, chances are you're in executive management. Factor in global economic concerns, recruitment challenges and tough government guidelines, and chances are you're a stressed leader, whatever the industry.

Workplace stress is a common ailment

According to recent studies , more than one third of the general workforce reports a high level of stress. However, leadership stress differs greatly from that suffered by typical employees.

For example, while a lead scientist might lose sleep over an especially complicated calculation that is not testing as expected in the laboratory, his or her executive department head will be stressing over an inability to secure more government funding, which will cost that scientist a job. And, while the sales department's administrator feels overwhelmed by various salespeople's annoying daily habits, his or her executive manager is wondering how to motivate 45 people to increase sales figures by 30 percent before month's end.

The responsibility and accountability that leaders bear can be a heavy burden. Increased pressure to meet objectives, manage people and make tough decisions inevitably results in a struggle to balance the critical tasks of maintaining corporate growth while also keeping employees and management teams happy and on track. Many times, the responsibilities come at the expense of the leader's personal time and peace of mind.

There is good news

However, not all stress is negative. Certain types of stress can help drive performance and can be the foundation for extraordinary innovation and accomplishment. The pressure to succeed, meet goals and beat the competition can be positively channeled into R&D, performance management and competitive strategies that enable individuals, teams and entire organizations to develop breakthrough technologies, devise creative solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems and deliver results beyond expectations.

For key executives, the problem with stress occurs when the pressure becomes more dominant than the objective. During these times, management styles tend to become more blunt and dictatorial, decisions become rushed and, ultimately, the executive and the organization suffer very real costs as performance falters. In worst cases, the executive suffers mental and physical illness.

What is the solution?

Simple techniques not only effectively manage leadership stress, but can also result in enhanced communication, superior team management and corporate achievement.

Become a Better Delegator

As a leader, you're accountable for results, with your career dependent on the performance of your teams. As a result, you may be tempted to 'do it all yourself' or micro-manage every task. According to an article in the Wall Street Journal, written by Kayleen Schaefer: "The reason so many leaders have trouble giving up projects is because they've risen up the corporate ladder by doing everything themselves."

Of course, along with career achievement comes the impossibility of continuing an effective 'do-it-yourself' strategy. As leadership responsibility increases, so does the need to effectively get work done through other people. To become a better delegator, and decrease your stress levels while increasing your effectiveness, consider the following tactics.

- **Hiring:** do you hire people who are smarter and more technically capable than you are? Most executives say that they want to hire the best. In reality, however, they tend to hire people who have slightly less competency than they do themselves. To be an effective delegator, you must build a team you can trust, and hiring the right people is the most important first step.
- **Training:** once the key people are on staff, it's important to make sure the team's skills are kept up-to-date. Create a proactive plan to regularly evaluate each person's skills and knowledge, and plan for future training needs. It is always easier to delegate with confidence when the team's skills and knowledge are current.
- **Management:** in addition to key employee's competence and skill levels, effective management systems are essential. While it is beyond the scope of this article to review different management structures and philosophies, the challenge is to find effective methods that best fit the company's culture. Ideally, the system ensures people clearly understand how their personal career goals work alongside management expectations, and provides key indicators to monitor performance and ensure goals are met.
- **Delegation:** with the right key people and effective processes in place, delegation is a much easier task. All that remains is to determine what and to whom to delegate. As a starting point, prioritize the tasks that only you can do, and then get everything else off your desk. Anything that can be done by someone else should be done by someone else. During delegation, provide a concise explanation of the tasks, and a clear completion deadline. Ask follow-up questions to ensure the person being delegated to understands the project, and is willing and able to meet the deadlines.

Take Breaks

Successful leaders typically have little or no free time in the workday. However, one of the keys to beating stress is to give the mind and body occasional chances to recharge. In other words, take a break once in a while. The following ideas can provide a healthy balance.

1. Schedule daily mini-breaks, and plan several mental breaks throughout the day. For example, if you're in front of a computer most of the day, schedule two or three daily three-minute walks. If

you're going to be locked in meetings most of the day, use breaks to step outside, stretch, walk or listen to music. If your job requires constant movement, schedule a five or 10-minute sit-down break every few hours. Balance is about not doing the same thing all day long.

2. Strike a better work/life balance. It almost goes without saying that vacation time is crucial to beating stress. That means not being attached to a laptop, cell phone or other remote device. Yes, it's hard to get away from the office, but that's the only real way to unwind.

3. Make time to take stock of personal priorities and the role your work plays in helping achieve your objectives. Feeling out of control can often trigger stress. The simple act of putting things in perspective can help regain control and have a very positive impact on mental health.

4. Tune out at the end of the day. Most leaders take their work home with them each night. Whether you're physically checking e-mail or just thinking about corporate issues, there comes a time when you need to leave work and leadership responsibilities behind. Set personal time boundaries and stick to them. For example, decide to turn off your cell phone as you walk in the front door each evening, or stop checking e-mail after 9 p.m. To ensure that your work time is as productive as possible, have time that is truly relaxing time.

Positive Attitude

When leadership stress is at its peak, it can lead to depression, and doubts about your abilities. You may find yourself dwelling on the "shoulds" in your professional life: I should be making more money; I should be handling this latest project better; my staff should like me more, etc. This is just stress wearing down on your self-confidence and resolve. Don't give in to it. Instead, refocus on something positive.

One easy solution is to remind yourself of something pleasant in a non-work area of your life, such as your child's baseball team triumph last night, or the pride you felt when you completed the charity marathon run last month. Another solution is to write down your assets and accomplishments – when you feel overwhelmed by stress, pull out the list and remind yourself of all the things you have done and the people whose lives you have positively impacted.

Conclusion

Certain stress factors will never disappear, and may become exacerbated with economic fluctuations and scarcity of skilled key employees. Whether it's the pressure of keeping up with industry standards or dealing with tight budgets, leadership stress can have a negative impact on your performance, focus and health, and also on the company. Senior management attitudes dictate stress levels throughout the organization. If you delegate efficiently, maintain balance and think positively, you will be able to rise above leadership stress, bringing the team and the company along with you on the road to success.

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